

A TALE OF TWO SYSTEMS: SYNERGY IN MANAGING RISKS TO PEOPLE AND TO COLLECTIONS

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The two systems of managing health and safety and of managing preservation of cultural property have many parallels. Either, or both, can exist as predominantly habit-based systems. However, when managed from a proactive perspective, they can be considered goal-directed systems. In the first case, the goal is to maintain health and avoid accidents to people. In the second case, the goal is to avoid damage and loss to cultural property. Both goals are clear, widely accepted, and even inarguably noble and worthy, seemingly a great advantage for both systems.

Habit-based and goal-based approaches are not mutually exclusive. A well-managed goal-based system will foster adoption of good habits that then allow the systems to operate effectively and economically. Both health and safety and cultural property preservation systems will operate best when they are mutually supportive. In many instances, this mutual support arises automatically as a consequence of the basic similarities of the systems—both strive to avoid any unnecessary and harmful interaction of people, energy and materials.

As a simple example, wearing appropriate gloves while handling objects protects the wearer as well as the collection object/specimen from contamination. Similarly, avoiding abrasion and decrepitation of inherently toxic collection objects has clear benefit both to the objects and people that are near them. There are many such examples of complete correspondence of purpose between the health and safety and preservation systems. In these cases both systems will naturally be mutually supportive.

Not all potential intersections of the two systems align automatically. As an example, most institutions that care for cultural property conduct regularly scheduled health and safety inspections of all work areas. Few institutions have a similar routine comprehensive inspection for collection preservation issues. The management of risks to collections could benefit from including a collection care specialist in the team conducting a health and safety inspection. That specialist would be tasked to look for and document situations that pose, or exacerbate, risks to collections. This would both ensure the regularity of such inspections and foster synergism between the two systems to produce an integrated risk management system.

Some examples of conflicts between the two risk management systems can also be found. For instance, an old collection of pharmaceuticals can pose many risks. From a health and safety perspective, disposal seems the obvious solution. From a curatorial perspective, keeping contents intact for future analysis may be important. The exercise of developing a creative solution that protects both people and collections can lead to improved understanding among all parties.

Viewing health and safety and cultural property preservation as parallel and closely related risk management systems opens the way to improvements in both. Combining the two encourages synergies that can lead to effective risk management and resource allocation by custodians of our collected heritage.

Keywords

risk management, health and safety, preservation, goal-directed management